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UTOPIAN PRAGMATISM: SCOTLAND'S CHOICE

Lindsay Paterson

Abstract

The Scottish referendum of autumn 2014 has been debated as if it was a unique moment in the country's history, and in several senses it was indeed unprecedented – in the level of engagement by citizens which it stimulated, in the acceptance by all sides to the debate that the decision on independence was Scotland's alone (which was an implicit recognition of popular sovereignty), and in its being the first ever democratic and explicit endorsement of the Union by Scotland. Nevertheless, there is also a sense in which the pattern of protest and compromise that led to the referendum and that pervades its aftermath is very familiar – the latest in a series of such processes that have characterised Scotland's always evolving place in the Union since 1707. Radical challenge is followed by pragmatic adjustment as the state cedes just enough power to keep the Union intact for the time being, a compromise which sows the seeds of the next phase of radical rebellion. That is why Scotland's position never fully satisfies anyone, and why, on this occasion, the basis for a new challenge to the Union (and for a new compromise to that new challenge) has probably already been laid before even the outcome of this referendum has been fully settled.

Keywords: Referendum; independence; devolution; negotiated autonomy.

Introduction

Immediately after the Scottish independence referendum last autumn, it was widely noticed that the losers were behaving as if they had won, getting on with policy and preparing policy, while the winners, when not actually, with

Lindsay Paterson is editor of Scottish Affairs, and is in the School of Social and Political Science, Edinburgh University.

Utopian Pragmatism

Labour, in a state of political trauma, were frantically active dealing with what they think is the main issue, the constitution. Why? What has turned things upside down, and no doubt will continue to do so long after the time of writing of this article?

That such questions arise demonstrates one thing at least: the referendum turns out to be more intriguing in its aftermath than the rather familiar debates that led up to the vote. Scotland has been debating this question for so long that no-one with any interest in politics, observing the very long campaign leading to 18 September, can fail to have heard it all before – what Tom Nairn called as long ago as 1970 ‘the tired legalistic arguments for independence’, and ‘the totally Pickwickian “economic problem” of whether Scotland would be “viable” and could survive “on her own” – as if she was some kind of small shopkeeper, in fact, not part of an international economic order’ (Nairn, 1970). The most visible public events of the campaign were largely theatrical rather than of substance, and therefore inevitably focused on personalities and performance – who would win the televised debates, what would be the effect of interventions by Gordon Brown, David Cameron, or George Osborne – or whether one or other of the prominent pro-independence campaigners could cogently answer questions about currency, tax or membership of the European Union. There was also a very extensive debate taking place away from the television screens – online, and by more traditional means – but all it had to go on was the same well-established material that furnished the public debates, and so, to the extent that such discussions can be observed at all, they do not seem to have yielded anything strikingly new (Shephard et al., 2013, 2014).

None of that was surprising about the campaigning, since it was merely bringing to a head various kinds of pressure that have been building in Scotland for generations, perhaps for over century. The referendum appeared to be, in Nairn’s words again, the moment when Scottish history at last became real, ending what he thought was Scotland’s lamentable position as ‘the land where ideal has never, even for an instant, coincided with fact.’ It was the moment, according to Jim Sillars, when, for the 15 hours of actual voting, the Scottish people held sovereignty in their own hands (Sillars, 2014).

So the aftermath may seem utterly confusing. If Scotland was not sovereign unless independent, then its capacity to set the agenda since it voted has been quite remarkably autonomous. There is not only the manner in which the various anti-independence parties, submitting proposals to the Smith Commission on ‘strengthening the Scottish Parliament within the UK,’ have in effect defined these with reference to the option that is explicitly ruled out – including or omitting specific powers according to

whether they would strengthen or weaken the Union – but also the swift shift to leadership of the maximal devolution campaign of the SNP and the Greens, so apprehensive of that position as all the Unionist parties are. For a party whose three-quarters-of-a-century-old policy had just been rejected by the people on whose behalf it claims to speak more authentically than anyone else, the SNP was in autumn 2014 in remarkably good fettle, aided (as were the Greens) by an astonishing immediate rise in membership.

More fundamentally than in the minutiae of constitutional debate, however, has been the specific policy responses, once again demonstrating that the Scottish question has never really been directly about the constitution. The difference from all previous setbacks for ardent home rulers is that the losing party is still in power. Unlike after 1979 (when, as in 2014, Scotland was evenly divided) or 1992 (when the Tories were not wiped out) – or unlike the party-political disappointment for the SNP of 1999 or 2003 – the party could respond by doing things. Thus we had John Swinney's budget, out-maneuvring opponents by his headline-catching redistributive use of minor taxation powers that were already coming Scotland's way as the long-term consequence of his party's electoral victories in 2007 and 2011. We had a change to the drink-drive limit, making use of new devolved powers that had already arrived. We had the appearance of big bits of machinery laying railway track to the borders, watched by transport minister Keith Brown (while contending for the SNP deputy leadership). We had the rescue of Ferguson shipbuilders in Port Glasgow, overseen by the First Minister and aided by independence-supporting businessman Jim McColl, who also prominently pressed ahead with innovative ideas about vocational education in Glasgow. And we had, in response to UK government proposals, an insistence from the Scottish Government that Scotland would remain fully committed to the European Convention on Human Rights.

In contrast, as that last controversy illustrates, the UK government and the British Labour Party have largely proceeded as if the referendum had never happened, except when they remember about the constitutional question explicitly, thus committing that old error of UK politicians of supposing that the fuss really is, after all, about constitutions, the same myopia as – for example – led Ian Lang two decades ago, when he was pre-devolution Secretary of State for Scotland, to propose that the Scottish problem might be dealt with by holding meetings of the Scottish Grand Committee in Scotland, or led the normally sensible Michael Forsyth, when he inherited that blighted office, to imagine that carting the Stone of Destiny over the border bridge between Cornhill and Coldstream would satisfy Scottish preferences for national recognition. By and large, the season of UK party conferences in the

Utopian Pragmatism

autumn passed with a great deal of mutual congratulation, and a sigh of relief that they still were of the UK. These unparalleled opportunities for media exposure for a new unionism were dominated by debates about social and economic policy which, as is customary, simply pretended that the UK is a single entity, and paid no attention whatsoever to the kinds of social policy that might be required to make a reality of such assumptions or of the lofty rhetoric about unity rather than uniformity which these same UK leaders, only weeks before, had proclaimed to be inviolable. The few unionist politicians of UK stature who knew otherwise – pre-eminently Gordon Brown – were notable by their absence. With the SNP government actually doing things distinctively, this return to normality thus rendered these congratulations decidedly premature and presumptuous, and sowed the seeds of electoral retribution not far away in Scotland's now permanent election campaign. No wonder the Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont resigned in frustration: her (and Brown's) position that the Union is quite consistent with growing Scottish distinctiveness seemed incomprehensible to colleagues even within her own party.

So what, from the perspective of much older history, are we to make of this situation? Why did the independence campaign, though losing the vote, attract to itself such radical commitment that it acquired the confidence to behave as if it had won? What are the consequences likely to be of the failure of all but a handful of unionist politicians to see that the question is about policy not structures? In trying to answer such questions, this article suggests that the referendum and its aftermath are best seen as the latest instance in a long-familiar process of always evolving Scottish autonomy. Radical activism challenges existing structures of power, forcing them to compromise; but, in compromising, the radicals' programme is not satisfied, and so the seeds of disillusion and then future dissent are sown at the very moment that current discontent is appeased. If the current situation is another instance of that process, it is also, however, new because of the unprecedented level of political participation that the referendum provoked.

Pragmatism and utopianism: two stories about Scottish politics

There are two stories about Scotland in the Union, so different that they mark a fundamental divide, and yet so dependent on each other that they render that divide the most bitter of all. One is pragmatic. In the beginning, according to this view, the Union was a wise bargain, struck by far-seeing politicians aware of the immense dangers facing a small, poor and divided country on the

edge of Europe. It was a treaty settled legally and, on the whole (by the standards of the time) consensually and peacefully. It staved off immediate invasion and a repeat of the enforced assimilation that, only half a century earlier, Scotland had experienced under Cromwell. More positively, it gave the very weak Scottish economy access to markets and – though this was something that it took many decades to happen – the renewing effects of vigorous economic competition. The Union also, according to this view, created Scottish culture as we know it, precisely out of the tension that then permanently ensued between local loyalty and wider – eventually global – opportunity. Scotland's still most important contribution to world culture, the Enlightenment, is inconceivable without these dual pressures – the universalism of the age, now penetrating into the heart of Scottish thinking, and the continuing awareness of local loyalty, the attachment to place and community and tradition. That is what makes Hume, Smith, Ferguson, Hutcheson, Miller and Reid so different from the abstract theorising of many other branches of the European Enlightenment, and so also similar to contemporary English thinkers such as Samuel Johnson, for all the differences of style.

The other story holds this pragmatism in contempt. The Union was a betrayal, Scotland bought and sold by corrupt elites negotiating across a border that the common people, allegedly, would never have voluntarily given up. Whatever eventual benefits the treaty brought, they took a long time to come, and Scotland's weak position permanently undermined its status. The Enlightenment marked a cultural betrayal, not only in the essentially trivial sense that most of the leading thinkers of the time went out of their way to disown any sentimental attachments, but also in that their universalism denied Scotland as a distinctive place. A state based on the universal principles of liberty and the free market was thus a repudiation of anything which a patriotic Scot would desire. Few would have accepted this critique at the time, and those who did – such as most famously Burns, but also some of the Enlightenment thinkers in their opposition to, for example, the refusal to let Scotland raise its own militia – complained not so much that Scottish autonomy was being eroded but that Scotland was not being treated equally; thus the complaints were not about assimilation but about its absence. But these discontents formed the basis of the recurrent protest from the mid-nineteenth century onwards that the Union had never served Scotland well.

This duality is the reality of Scotland's story – not the one or the other, but both. Scotland has never been wholly content in the Union, because it has rarely felt treated as an equal. Even agitating for equality can create a sense of difference. But neither has Scotland ever shown any serious sign of wanting

Utopian Pragmatism

to secede, until perhaps now, for the simple reason that the complaints have always hitherto had their desired effect, or at least to the extent that was needed to allay the discontent. Throughout the last three centuries, the story has recurred: dissatisfaction grows, often to an intensity that threatens to destroy the Union, at least among the politically active and vociferous. The ground of that protest is always that Scots are not being treated equally, with respect, with regard to their rights. But then the UK state remembers its inherent flexibility and pragmatism, and concedes just enough not just to placate the discontent for the time being – which would be merely cynical – but actually, wisely enough, appreciating what the real discontent is, which is not about constitutional structures but about social, economic and political issues.

There is probably nothing particularly unusual about this: the UK is not as peculiar as a certain kind of sceptical history-writing, often of a Scottish nationalist kind (such as by Tom Nairn himself), tends to suggest. Insofar as democratic politics can ever influence social change, it probably does so through a dialectic of this sort – radical pressure, slow establishment response, compromise that leads to disillusion among the radicals, and then in turn the next round of pressure. The Edinburgh sociologist Jonathan Hearn puts this well, writing about much more general questions than those faced by Scotland (but having taken account of the Scottish case):

in each case [of major social change] there is a movement of issues onto the agenda, a politicisation of what was formerly normally taken for granted. But this movement is triggered by troubles and conflicts that develop around existing patterns of authority that are commonly recognised as such.
(Hearn, 2012: 26)

It is this 'common recognition' that allows for periods of relative stability (such as in Scotland for a decade after 1997, or as we are likely to be facing for a while again now), but the scepticism that was generated by the previous wave of protest never goes away. The key point, as Hearn notes (2012: 6), is that disagreement over particular issues – say, how to fund a health service, or how to expand higher education, or whether and how to redistribute wealth – always leads in due course to questions about the very structures of power through which issues might be resolved.

In short, protest and compromise and then later renewed protest against the inevitably unsatisfactory eventual outcome of the previous compromise has been the dynamic which has kept Scotland in the Union, though also has always, for exactly the same reason, kept it permanently un-satisfied.

What's more, that seems likely now to be again what will result from everything that has been happening these last few years. But before we get to trying to understand what is likely to develop next, it is useful to look in some more detail at previous episodes in this dynamic, partly to see how it has worked, but mainly also to reflect on what is different this time.

The most recent previous phase started in the 1960s and led to the setting up of the Scottish Parliament in 1997–9. During this period two now dominant themes emerged. One is that Scotland is essentially to the left of England. The other is that Scottishness and Britishness are at best complementary to each other, and, more likely, antagonistic. These two fed off each other, Britishness coming to be seen as itself a conservative identity, associated with a dead empire and a decrepit ruling class. These themes started to emerge in the 1960s as voting patterns started to diverge, the Conservatives declining in Scotland almost without interruption from one half to one quarter of the vote. The protests against the lengthy period of Conservative government from 1979 to 1997 are then a familiar story, but it is the ideological character of these which matter for interpreting their legacy. Not only did the campaigning contrast radical Scotland with Tory England; it saw the problem as lying in the unreformed constitutional structures of a Britain that was felt no longer to be serving Scotland's needs. The left-wing radicalism of the protests against the Conservative government then became associated with radical ideas about the constitution, asserting a putative Scottish tradition of popular sovereignty to set against the centralising power of what was correspondingly perceived as the dominant English tradition of monarchical power.

This was utopian campaigning of a peculiarly Scottish kind, since – with supreme irony – only the outside intervention of Tony Blair managed to insist that the popular sovereignty that was proclaimed would actually have to rest on popular sovereignty, in a referendum that almost none of the campaigners had advocated before he announced it as Labour policy in the summer of 1996. Popular sovereignty to that point had been the rhetoric of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, an unelected and somewhat secretive mechanism by which some segments of the public-sector middle class used its corporate power in sundry civil-society organisations to induce the Labour party to support reform. The story unfolded then as a series of compromises – the inevitable acceptance that only a change of government at Westminster could bring about a parliament, the inevitably constrained extent of its powers, and thus the inevitable disappointment with its operation since it could never have satisfied the astonishingly high levels of expectation that accompanied its establishment: when voting in the referendum in 1997, enormous majorities expected that a Scottish parliament would improve Scotland's education,

Utopian Pragmatism

health service and economy, would empower citizens against Scottish government, and would strengthen Scotland's voice in the UK (Brown et al., 1999). When none of these things seemed to have happened quickly, disillusion began to fuel the next phase of radical protest that culminated in due course in the referendum of 2014.

The key features of this period were then not only the emergence of the rhetoric of Scotland as more left-wing than England, and Scotland in fundamental antagonism to Britain, but – of much greater significance for interpreting how the protests were temporarily satisfied – the actual capacity of the UK state to prove the inadequacy of both these utopian propositions. The parliament was created by – to put it crudely – an English Labour majority at Westminster, however important the sanction of the large referendum majority in 1997 was. This was the result of non-Tory England and the flexibility of the UK state, recognising – belatedly perhaps – that reform was required. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that it was only because Blair could present the case as a reform of Britain, rather than merely a response to radical Scottish campaigning, that the majority in the 1997 referendum was as large as it turned out to be (Brown et al., 1999). So this whole period from the 1960s to the end of the century showed the characteristic features of Scottish development quite graphically: utopian articulation leading to radical protest, met eventually by a Britain grudgingly remembering that its very essence has been a kind of muddled pragmatism, but the compromises of which then store up the pressures that lead to the next phase of protest, which is now.

The structural essence of the process was not new. When the campaigning started in the 1960s, part of the nationalist protest recalled the early commitment to Scottish home rule of the nascent Labour party up to the 1920s. When Labour was being radicalised on the home-rule question again through the Constitutional Convention, its highly influential internal pressure group, Scottish Labour Action, recalled these early days and complained that, when Labour had had the chance to bring about home rule in the 1945 government, it had betrayed that legacy (McLean, 1991; see also Mitchell, 1996). Part of the radical protest from the left in the 1980s was based on a sense that the old structures of the welfare state that had been set up by that government were too centralised, patronising, and discouraging of popular sovereignty. The Scottish radicalism of the 1920s and 1930s had seemed to offer a quite different welfare state, or at least seemed in retrospect half a century later to have done so. Scotland had taken from the moral demise of nineteenth-century capitalism an attachment to the state that was more intense than anything to be found in England.

Scotland was the land of the Presbyterian common weal whose rhetoric of millenarian emancipation pervaded Labour thinking. It was the place where the democratic intellect would create an educated citizenry with the capacity to challenge elites and seize popular control. It had inspired, according to this story, radical Clydeside, in fond memory an almost revolutionary challenge to capitalism. Furthermore, in disillusion with the slowly emerging caution of Labour in the 1920s, this was also the period when the modern nationalist movement was created.

The actual moderation of the 1945 government – and especially its abandonment of any kind of Scottish legislative autonomy – looked to later generations of radical campaigners to be unsatisfactory, but may be better thought of as the then latest phase in the adjustment of the state to radical Scottish challenge. The discontent with capitalism, and the sense of equal citizenship that the 1939–45 war evoked, enabled these Scottish radicals to find allies throughout the UK, but the ends which they sought in common in the short term – of using the state to mitigate the effects of capitalism – were more important than the means of Scottish home rule, or the revolutionary overthrow of the whole social order. In any case, revolution was coming to have less of an appeal in the democratic world, faced with Russian realities and with the duplicitous behaviour of the Communist Party in Britain in the 1930s, and so the prospect of setting up a pragmatically beneficial welfare state seemed the best compromise on offer. For Scottish socialists, moreover, the opportunity to share risks across a democratising UK was very much more appealing than trying to construct a welfare state on the increasingly insecure basis of the declining Scottish economy. The land of the democratic intellect could smoothly adapt to middle opinion as an alliance of technocrats and socialists; the pioneering of a public medical service in the Highlands in the 1930s could fit well with the new NHS; the place where regional economic planning was invented (at Glasgow University) could readily accept that a welfare state needed to be centralised. These late-1940s compromises contained the seeds of the post-1960s radical challenges, just as the 1990s devolution settlement led, two decades later, to the radical campaigning for independence, but in each case the translation of prior radicalism into pragmatic adjustment was an instance of a recurrent theme.

Analogous stories can take us right back to the Union. One further instance is the response of Scottish Victorian liberalism to the growing power of the central state after the middle of the nineteenth century. The essentially anti-statist Calvinism that was the source of the dominant Scottish liberal philosophy had been expressed locally, but local forums were ceding power to the central state which was perceived to be dominated by alien Tory

Utopian Pragmatism

paternalism. Out of this sense of looming powerlessness and marginalisation came what is recognisable as the first stirrings of modern nationalism, notably in the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights in the 1850s. The outcome of this liberal campaigning, by the 1880s, was – as later – a series of compromises. The state responded by setting up the Scottish Office – without which there would not have been, much later, the Scottish aspects of the welfare state or the machinery of government that eventually became the executive of the Scottish Government – but at the time it mattered rather in a symbolic sense as a recognition of Scottish rights. More profoundly, what actually left a direct legacy in the capacity of Scottish civil society to manage the transition from unregulated capitalism was the development of new ways of retaining in Scottish local hands the developing liberal-welfare state – school boards, incipient medical services, the beginnings of public support for the poor, all staffed by the growing armies of professionals who had imbibed the ethos of Calvinist responsibility in their studies at universities. Moreover, as with the socialists who saw the Union as a way of spreading economic risk after 1945, these people remained attached to the Union above all because it seemed to guarantee international security and access to imperial markets: the dangers of smallness and peripherality were themes long before the debates in the 2014 referendum. It was then this network of liberal boards and committees which became the undemocratic institutions against which socialists (and, later, nationalists) protested in the 1920s, with the resulting compromise of 1945.

Such processes of challenge and compromise throughout the last three centuries then may be interpreted in the two ways which we have noted, shaping the debate which we now have. On the one hand is the claim that Scotland has always recognised sovereignty as limited, fluid, and negotiated. That theme was asserted in the 1980s often against the centralising tendencies of the Conservative government – Margaret Thatcher’s sense that an absolute majority in parliament gave her the absolute right to implement the policies of the ruling party. This was the whole tenor of the Claim of Right which the Scottish Constitutional Convention issued in 1988. That was part of the immediate political context, as was the feminist view that absolute notions of power were inconsistent with a democracy which enabled participation. Lying further in the background of the notion of limited sovereignty were the Calvinist and Catholic views that to claim absolute secular power is hubristic, because no human institutions can be omniscient. The most important shift in SNP thinking in the 1980s – from independence to independence in Europe – recognised the artificiality of absolute sovereignty,

too, and accepted that sharing risk across large territories is pragmatically sensible. The very concept of independence might then seem chimerical, and thus point to a No vote in 2014, though many of the individual activists who argued against UK state sovereignty in the 1980s and 1990s were to be found arguing for a Scottish version of it in 2014, sometimes forced there by the artificially dichotomous choice that had been imposed in the referendum.

The other interpretation – much more publicly to the fore in 2014 – was that the first view is craven. If the artificially simple choice between independence and roughly the current structure of power appealed to a certain kind of unionist, it certainly also suited the mirror-image nationalist for whom only sovereign independence could ever be truly autonomous. Though Tom Nairn, as we saw, used to be sceptical of that position, he had, by the mid-1990s, come to a view that was close to it, and which has in turn inspired the current generation of radical activists. What he has referred to as merely ‘managerial’ autonomy involved opting out of history, leaving real politics to elsewhere. He calls this a preference for ‘lower case’ rather than ‘upper case’ nationalism. Managerial autonomy, he claimed, is debilitating culturally and psychologically, inducing what he calls ‘display identity’ – notoriously, he believes, the empty rhetoric of Labour politicians apparently asserting the rights of an entity they call ‘the Scottish people,’ but not following that through into a determined assertion of national autonomy. Nationalist agitation in Scotland, according to Nairn, and echoed frequently in the 2014 debate, is a popular attempt to re-enter the mainstream, both politically and culturally. What Nairn called in his 1970 essay the redemptive dream of separatist nationalism – recognising in the description its utopian character – had come by 2014 to be the driving force of the campaigning for independence.

The main point, to reiterate, is not whether one or other of these two stories is the more accurate account, but that they are dependent on each other: political pressure forces change – because without pressure Scotland is ignored, regarded with incomprehension by the state – but the change is a compromise, and so the next wave of disillusion and then utopian frustration is built into the pragmatic response. This operates on both the major ideological dimensions which affected the 2014 debates. Social democrats need radical socialists. Home rulers need radical nationalists. But neither the socialists nor the nationalists will ever get what they want because what they want is utopian, and – more to the point – the Scots will always be content to accept that for a while, until the next wave of frustration and protest comes along.

The two stories in the referendum

The referendum debate is, then, best understood as the latest confrontational playing out of these two stories about Scotland's history, developing most immediately from the period between 1997 and 2011: it is the eventual revolt of the utopian left against what is perceived as the insufferable caution and conservatism of Scottish civil society. Before the advent of the parliament, there remained a question about its relationship to the already heavily populated institutional landscape, large segments of which – through the Constitutional Convention – had agitated for its existence. Would the parliament challenge these vested interests, or be captured by them? The answer was always in fact obvious. Partly because of its parentage in the Convention, partly because of its limited economic powers, partly because of the negotiations and compromises that the parliament's consultative style enjoined, and partly because there was never a practicable programme of radical social policy on offer (though plenty of improbable rhetoric), the Parliament could never have avoided becoming civil society incarnate. It was completely dependent on civic elites for ideas, too, since the Scottish civil service lacked experience and expertise in all but a few areas of policy: recurrently, this and the incessant consultations, led to experts in various interest groups being consulted on proposals which they themselves had been centrally involved in drafting. None of this diminished when the SNP came to power in 2007, or even when it had an absolute majority in 2011, because it, too, was dependent on civil society for ideas, and also had learnt from the experience of the Constitutional Convention that change would come only if civil society was on its side.

This all gave a ready target for the radical independence campaign, although its gravest weakness was – like the anti-globalisation 'Occupy' movement in 2011, which it quite closely resembled – not to have produced an alternative, worked-out programme. Never before had the early Nairn's characterisation of modern Scottish nationalism as redemption seemed so apt, so closely tied had the campaign come to a metaphor of national liberation. To say this during the campaign was to attract accusations of negativity, of pessimism, of precisely the dependency that the later Nairn alleged. Yet to raise such points was to do no more than generations of pragmatists had done before in response to generations of utopians. The belief that independence would lead to radical social change was the campaign's dominant theme. The Scottish Government's manifesto for independence, *Scotland's Future*, believed that 'independence means that the people of Scotland will take responsibility for our future into their own hands,' with no hint of the prior 1990s Scottish debates about

inter-dependence and the constraints on autonomy. Nor was there any admission of the compromises entailed in real social progress, or of the internal ideological divisions that all societies have:

if we transfer decision-making powers from Westminster to Scotland we are more likely to see policies that are in tune with the values of the people of Scotland, that close the gap between rich and poor, and provide greater opportunities for everyone in Scotland regardless of their background. We can build a fairer society.

The utopian theme was echoed before the actual vote by almost all the most eloquent exponents of independence. Thus Joyce McMillan wrote in July 2014 of ‘the positive forces that have been unleashed in Scotland by this campaign, of their irreverence, their confidence, their inventiveness, and their determination – whatever the referendum outcome – to work at grass-roots level to unleash more of this country’s magnificent potential,’ and she saw as the enemy of this uprising not only ‘Westminster’ but also, internally, ‘Scotland’s traditional power-holders, from the landowners and big commercial interests to the mainstream politicians, local councillors and senior public servants.’ Accurately noting that ‘for Scotland, the Union has always been conditional on its ability to deliver real gains, in terms of freedom, opportunity and justice,’ she implicitly assumed that the Union could no longer do so, engulfed as it was, she said, by ‘the huge right-ward shift of Westminster politics over the past generation.’

As prominent in putting this case as McMillan was Lesley Riddoch, writing in August 2014 that ‘the social democratic leaning of Scottish voters is almost as old as women’s right to vote,’ in other words since the 1920s. She contrasted ‘Scotland’s traditions of education, law and religion’ with ‘England’s increasingly market-obsessed, winner-takes-all society ... – a culture of uninhibited greed created by Margaret Thatcher and fuelled by New Labour’s failure to reform or regulate.’ This national difference, she said, was ‘the main driver for Scottish independence.’

Further back, in a collection published in 2012 on the question of independence (nearly all in fact pro-independence), there were several contributions in this vein. Alan Armstrong, veteran socialist activist, argued, echoing struggles long ago, that ‘socialists should use the referendum campaign not only to put forward a very different vision of an independent Scotland, but to link this up with all those resisting the current attacks on our class’ (Armstrong, 2012). Alan Bissett proposed that ‘the first thing we must do is re-admit the concept of a working class back into politics. This class not only never went away, given how many were left behind by both Thatcher and

Utopian Pragmatism

Blair, but is now expanding to include “middle-class” people whose living standards have narrowed’ (Bissett, 2012). The socialist case was probably most visibly expressed by Jim Sillars, who wrote in spring 2014 that ‘the myth of Scottish inadequacy’ would be dispelled ‘when, on achieving independence, Scots own their own country, are beholden to no one, bend the knee to no one, ask permission of no one for policies the people need, when they can think new thoughts, embrace new ideas and use the power that lies latent within themselves to change things for the better forever. In place of fear we will create a nation proud, self-confident, prosperous, in which the working people will have the opportunity to exert their power to quickly build a fair and just society.’ As with Armstrong, there is an unacknowledged slippage from ‘Scotland’ to specific social classes within Scotland, a synecdoche that has characterised rhetoric about Scotland since the 1920s. No wonder there was a van touring Edinburgh on polling day proclaiming that voting Yes would ‘end Tory rule forever;’ the surprise is indeed that even as many as 8% of the people who voted Conservative in the 2011 Scottish parliamentary election voted Yes (YouGov, 2014).

The ultimate effect of such axiomatic rhetorical assertions of Westminster’s collusion in worsening social conditions was graphically exemplified during the final BBC referendum debate, held in Stirling on 14 September (BBC Scotland, 2014), when a questioner’s personal experience of witnessing child poverty in Lanarkshire ‘through the Thatcher and Labour years’ was confronted by Labour MP Douglas Alexander’s reciting the statistical evidence on its reduction when Labour was in power (Joyce and Sibieta, 2013; Sinclair and McKendrick, 2014). There was a sense of two kinds of politics – the utopian and the pragmatic – in mutual incomprehension, as if, faced with the aspiration to end poverty altogether, any measurable progress towards it was a mere figment.

Yet, implausible thought this rhetoric of radical Scotland against conservative Westminster may seem, to point that out is to mistake its function (as distinct from its conscious purpose). The utopianism is precisely what Scottish frustration with compromise provokes, and it was entirely to be expected during this campaign in particular, as was the initial negativity of the other side and the eventual forced compromise offering of more powers. Almost no-one on the No side acknowledged during the campaign the appeal to many of voting Yes, far less that the proposition was not absurd, however undesirable it might be in their judgement. With the notable exception of Gordon Brown, there were no extended expositions of the case against independence, which in one sense was also to be expected: as another audience member in that BBC Stirling debate noted, the answer to

the question of what would happen in the event of No majority is the condition that Scotland was then in (about which he was not enthusiastic). The Yes campaign had to set up a dystopia of No as the basis of its own utopian imaginings, but, under a Conservative-led government which, in a partisan sense, appealed to almost no likely Yes voters, that demonising task was readily done. The No campaign's negativity helped Yes along this way.

Yet there was also something deeply disingenuous about the Yes campaign complaint that the No side was negative, since the essence of the bargain between autonomy and inter-dependence that has commanded Scottish assent for three centuries is that the world is a risky place. If a philosophy was needed for that during the referendum campaigning, it was found in the speeches and writing of Gordon Brown, alone among politicians in developing a sustained intellectual defence of the Union. The essence of his case was the source of compromise that has recurrently reconciled Scotland to the Union, the sharing of risks:

behind the pooling and sharing of risks and resources ... is more than mutual interests – also a shared commitment to values that emphasise the importance of fairness, creating a Britain based on social justice between the nations and allowing us to define our country as a moral community.

(Brown, 2014: 232)

This, he said, was the ultimate contribution made by the Scottish Enlightenment, the sense of 'mutual human obligation.' The welfare state and similar achievements of the social democratic Union 'would make Adam Smith and David Hume immensely proud.'

We are reminded here of a generous obituary assessment of John Smith, Labour Leader, by his friend (and nationalist politician) Neil MacCormick:

like many social democrats faithful to some version of the ideal of international socialism and brotherhood, he was impatient of diversions from what he saw as the prime objective of pursuing social justice on as broad a front as possible. Social justice was to be secured only through the election of a Labour government. Paying people their pay 'in a tartan pay packet' would enhance neither income nor job security, as he once trenchantly put it in a [Glasgow University] Union debate. He saw no contradiction between his full-hearted commitment to a consciously British (and largely fabian) political tradition while at the same time profoundly attached to the mixed

Utopian Pragmatism

Gaelic-Scots heritage of Mid-Argyll and Kintyre where he and his people had their roots.
(MacCormick, 1994)

We are reminded, too, of one of the few publicly amicable exchanges in this recent campaign, between Andrew Wilson, former SNP MSP, and Alex Massie, No-supporting journalist (Massie and Wilson, 2014). Massie, who is not a socialist, it should be said, could characterise the Union in ways that would have been recognised by Brown, and might also be traced to Smith and Hume:

Alex Salmond says Scotland is a 'surly lodger' in the United Kingdom but that's not true is it? The United Kingdom is our house too, not a place in which we pay rent. We built it. Indeed, without Scotland there is no Great Britain. . . . The UK is our country too.

Fiscal responsibility, he agreed, was indispensable: 'you are right that a parliament with the power to spend but no responsibility to tax is a juvenile, half-formed legislature. Moreover it is one that will be persuaded that more money is the only answer to every problem. It guarantees spendthrift, unimaginative government.' Wilson, responding to this recognition of the respectable case for a great deal of independence, even if not actual statehood, could say that 'my appeal to you is not out of a disrespect for the story of the UK or Britain. That was a joint project that delivered much for many. But I feel it has run its course.'

Such writers, it might be imagined, could readily assent to Brown's argument that the principles underpinning the Union were not fundamentally distinct from those characterised as Scottish by the most ardent Yes campaigners. Brown in effect claimed for the Union the pragmatic compromises that have been the response to radical campaigning, and identified the shared principles that might explain why the compromises have worked in the past. The persistent such principle has been a commitment to universalism. The claim by the Yes side that exercising caution was craven, or that urging people to do so was inappropriate, seems bizarre when they could also argue (in *Scotland's Future*, for example) that a No vote would lead to all sorts of things of which the prominent supporters of the Yes campaign disapprove – 'a new generation of nuclear weapons on the Clyde', 'decisions with damaging effects on Scottish society', 'overall levels of public spending in Scotland . . . driven by decisions on priorities for England', funding cuts that would have 'serious consequences for Scottish public services', and 'the serious possibility that Scotland will be forced to leave the EU against the wishes of the people of Scotland.' The validity of these claims may be

contested, as may the descriptions of England by Yes campaigners which we noted above; but what is indisputable is that they are every bit as negative in their characterisation of the consequences of a No vote as were the No side's claims about independence. Politics always contains negatives as well as positives; utopia always depends on a dystopia to give it force.

The two stories in the outcome

What we have then now is all too familiar, a radical assertion followed by a compromise that was forced from the state in order to stem the appeal of that rebellion. But in another sense the situation we are now in is unprecedented because, for the first time, there has been an explicit, democratic vote on the ultimate utopia of national freedom. The implications for independence of each previous referendum could be endlessly debated because it was never offered. The implications for or against independence of votes for or against the SNP were, likewise, always unclear, because people vote for parties on many grounds (for Labour at Westminster elections perhaps because the SNP cannot form a government there; now for the SNP at Scottish elections because on the whole they are seen to be efficient and competent at doing the mundane business of governing). The original Union, no matter how constitutionally valid in its time, was in no modern sense democratic.

The difference now comes from three separate features of the 2014 vote. First, there was agreement by almost everyone that the decision was Scotland's alone. That was a decision to recognise that sovereignty does lie with the people of Scotland, and the contingent outcome of the actual vote does not change that: the proposition was not 'is Scotland a sovereign nation?', since no one seemed to doubt that it was. The claim that sovereignty was surrendered by there having been a No majority is unsustainable. The only issue at stake was whether popular sovereignty required sovereign institutions.

The second novel situation is the very extensive engagement with the process of the debate, and the largest electoral participation since the coming of full adult suffrage. As the journalist Peter Jones observed:

behind all that participation was passionate debate and exuberant organisation. Groups backing No and Yes sprang up all over the place, some marshalled by common interests and occupation, many more drawn together by ties of community. Experienced politicians were surprised by the astounding vitality that the indyref unleashed. (Jones, 2014)

Utopian Pragmatism

It is not now plausible to argue that the nation has not decided, except on the grounds satirised poetically by Brecht in the aftermath of the violent suppression of the rising in Berlin in 1953:

After the uprising of the 17th of June
The Secretary of the Writers Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

Nevertheless, lacking in a sense of historical irony though blaming the people may be, some Yes campaigners were not slow in doing so: 'Scotland, the country that wasn't' proclaimed the web site Wings Over Scotland the day after the referendum, 'it pains us to say, will get the reward it deserves for its gutlessness' (Campbell, 2014). Joyce McMillan argued that 'the country' had been 'shot firmly in the foot with our own hands, and back on our knees, the position in which we seem to feel most comfortable,' not a view presumably shared by the 55% of the country who voted No (McMillan, 2014b).

The third new aspect of the situation is that the compromises seem to have been built into the process, in the sense that the leaders of the UK-wide parties made specific and verifiable commitments to strengthen the powers of the Scottish parliament before the referendum took place. A referendum tends to focus the mind in that way, unlike the more diffuse processes of pressure and adjustment represented by, say, the uncertain rise of the Labour party between the 1920s and 1945, but the commitment compared to the previous referendum that was almost evenly divided (in 1979) is striking. Moreover, if the analysis put forward here is valid, then the fact that the compromise became in effect part of the vote means that the next phase of utopian dissatisfaction with the compromise will also probably be accelerated. The task facing the state has been made all the more intractable by the dichotomous choice which it forced on the referendum. Faced with a yes vote as high as 45%, those unionist politicians must be rediscovering a strand of Britishness that they seem to have forgotten – the virtue of compromise: well gone are the days when they used to claim (*Guardian*, 2014) that they had to

win ‘emphatically’ in order to ‘kill off independence’; they are now relieved to have won not too narrowly. Indeed, the most compromising party of all here bears the main responsibility. If the Liberal Democrats had been far-sighted enough in 2007, they might have entered into a coalition with the SNP on condition that a referendum offered multiple choices (as in the two-question referendum of 1997). A clear rejection of independence, and a clear way ahead, may well then by now have been the outcome. They and other unionists of similar belligerence are learning too late the wisdom of Colin Kidd’s comment that ‘it is a category error . . . to think of unionism and nationalism as opposites’ (Kidd, 2008: 6).

As it is, we have, from the losing side, an aftermath replete with those very myths of rebellion and betrayal that, recurrently in the past, have fed the Scottish predilection for renewed utopian intransigence and thus, in this case, for a fresh referendum not very far away. A myth immediately grew up that, in McMillan’s words again, ‘the union was only saved . . . by the overwhelming No vote of pensioners who can remember the UK in better times. And the vote also represented a victory of the comfortable over the dispossessed, of traditional top-down politics over a new grassroots politics, and of the relatively silent and disengaged over the engaged, the active and the passionate.’ One aspect of that interpretation was immediately discredited, the widely cited poll by Lord Ashcroft that supposedly showed 71% of 16–17-year-olds voting Yes, and yet had a mere 14 people in that age group (Ashcroft, 2014): more reliable data from YouGov showed the 16–24 age group to be evenly split, the highest Yes vote to be in ages 25–39 (55%), and people aged 65 or older in fact to have a sizeable minority (34%) voting Yes (YouGov, 2014). (Nevertheless, that Keith Brown, contending to be elected as SNP deputy leader, was still repeating the 71% figure a month later (Brown, 2014) suggests that the myth would be stubborn.) But the view that the Yes vote was a revolt by the dispossessed against the well-off has gained much momentum. Cat Boyd, of the Radical Independence Campaign, wrote that ‘as the vote got closer we saw a surge in support for independence among working class people who saw a Yes vote as a chance for change’ (Boyd, 2014). Pat Kane believed that ‘among the more affluent and settled in our society, the basic confidence that Scotland had the resources and competence to make its way as an economically independent nation, even under adverse opinion and conditions, crumbled away at the last’ (Kane, 2014).

Almost certainly the reality is much more complex, although we will have to await data from the various post-referendum academic surveys before we can be sure. What we do know, from data from the Scottish Social

Utopian Pragmatism

Attitudes Survey collected in mid-summer 2014 (and thus at a time when the Yes percentage among those who had made up their minds was still around 40%) was that the Yes support was not straightforwardly about social class but was rather about an interaction of political ideology and class. The message from the Table below is essentially that the Yes movement was led by left-leaning middle-class people. The Yes percentage in the left-leaning middle class among those who had made up their minds was 47%, higher than the 42% in the working class as a whole (and much the same as the 51% in the left-leaning working class). The roughly half (47%) of working-class people who leant to the right ideologically had only 33% support for Yes. The left-leaning middle class was already far ahead of the working class in 2013: in the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey of that year, their Yes percentage was already 48%, when the working class as a whole had 36%.

Even more specifically, the Yes vote was a left-wing male vote: in 2014, 58% of left-wing men intended to vote Yes, compared to 40% of left-wing women. Among left-wing working-class men (see Table), this reached 62%, whereas there was no class division among left-wing women. So what we have here is a familiar case of a movement led by male, left-wing, middle-class activists, speaking certainly to male, left-wing, working-class people, but less convincingly to the working class or women in general.

The middle-class left-wing leadership of the Yes campaign helps to explain the rhetoric both before and after the vote, but another myth which also has grown – that the vote was not about nationalism – also turns out probably not to be the case. The radical activist Cat Boyd has claimed that ‘it was not a wave of Scottish nationalism that powered the momentum towards a Yes vote: this was a debate about social justice, economic democracy and an opportunity for radical change.’ We have directly relevant data on this only from 2013, but from that year’s Scottish Social Attitudes Survey we can classify people according to whether they felt they had more in common with a ‘same class English person’ or an ‘opposite class Scottish person’, or that it depended on the person. About 37–38% of both the middle class and the working class felt they had more in common with someone who was an opposite class Scot; the remaining 62% were split evenly between the other two options. The Yes percentage was highest among those of either class who identified most with ‘opposite class Scots’: 46% and 41% respectively among such working-class and middle-class people, compared to 36% and 31% in the working class and middle class overall. Again, the percentages were highest among left-wing groups who identified with opposite-class Scots, notably in the middle class: 53% in the working class, and 59% in the middle class. Thus not only may we conclude that the Yes intention was strong among left-leaning middle-class

Table
Support for Yes, by social class, ideology and gender, 2014
(excluding people who had not decided)

	Working class	Middle class
Left	51 [190]	47 [251]
Right	33 [172]	19 [302]
All	42 [362]	32 [553]
Male		
Left	62 [96]	53 [128]
Right	35 [82]	21 [128]
All	48 [178]	37 [256]
Female		
Left	39 [94]	40 [123]
Right	31 [90]	17 [174]
All	35 [184]	27 [297]

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2014.

The responses show people choosing Yes among people who had a definite view; thus the No percentages are 100 minus those shown. Percentages are weighted. Unweighted sample sizes are shown in brackets

Definitions:

From National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification:

Working class: lower supervisory, technical, semi-routine, routine.

Middle class: employers, managers, intermediate, self-employed.

Left and Right are derived as respectively below and above the median on a scale constructed as the sum of responses (each on a five-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') to questions asking about (a) whether 'government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off'; (b) whether there is 'one law for the rich and one for the poor'; (c) whether 'ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'; (d) whether 'big business benefits owners at the expense of workers'; (e) whether 'management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance'.

people; it was strongest among those left-leaning middle-class people who identified with working-class Scots, and among left-leaning working-class people who did not show much solidarity with working-class people across the border. These findings are consistent with much other research suggesting that

Utopian Pragmatism

choosing Yes or No was strongly associated with how Scottish or British people felt (Curtice, 2014; McCrone, 2013).

In short, this was not straightforwardly a radical assertion of working-class socialism against elites. It was a rebellion by a minority of people on the left in both middle-class and working-class social groups. That is an important social feature of the Yes vote, but it does not make it a mass revolt against globalisation. The inclination to vote Yes is better understood as, on the whole, an expression of pragmatic nationalist discontent, something which Scotland has seen many times before. It was socially reformist in a mild way, in the sense that it was not very friendly to the Conservatives, but it was as much about national assertion as about ideology. It was about constitutions only as constitutions ever have been contemplated in Scotland, as means to certain social policy ends. Perhaps it was Gordon Brown's realism that won it for the No side, but even that had an element of utopianism, and he uniquely had the insight to see that he had to appeal to gut-instinct national identity and patriotism: his final speeches read like the moderate left-wing home-rule discourse of a previous era, though – as always with him – much more redolent of the moral passion of the Covenanters. It remains to be seen whether the promises will be delivered and, if they are (which seems likely, if only on the grounds of Labour self-interest) whether they satisfy campaigners on either side. The precedents for how Scotland reacts to past compromises do not hold out much hope for this one, and the energy of the ex-Yes campaign since the referendum suggests that Bernard Levin's explanation of utopian optimism remains cogent as a description of Scottish responses to its parliament: 'utopians are inured to disappointment [because] there are always fellow-utopians to throw a life-belt to those struggling in the water of broken promise' (Levin, 1994: 123).

That pragmatic adjustment to circumstances is the way things happen in the UK. That's also why the utopian movement that the Yes campaign has set in motion will remain deeply relevant even to the extent – or especially to the extent – that it is wrong. It was their campaigning that forced the compromises from the state that settled the issue. It was their assertion that to be Scottish is to be left-wing that galvanised a campaign which could probably never have been led by the SNP alone, and it was their radicalism that has kept the SNP marginally on the left, to Labour's discomfort. It was also their radicalism that forced the intervention from Brown, countering them on their own ideological ground with just sufficient cogency to win this particular day. The compromise that will be put in place in the next few years will work for a while, but already has before it, in this radicalism, its own nemesis. So the whole question will come back, perhaps with greater

acceleration if pushed on its way by external circumstances, such as a disputed result in the likely EU referendum. But, whatever happens, the outcome will continue to be compromise, will continue to generate radical discontent, and thus will never settle the Scottish question to the satisfaction of anyone.

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